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ABSTRACT

The seven-member board of a Texas school district decided to scrutinize its own performance through a self-evaluation instrument used by each member to evaluate how the board functions, not how each individual functions. Benefits of board self-evaluation include reaffirmation of the board's role, encouragement of board harmony, and identification of problems. The Tuloso-Midway self-evaluation instrument contains nine areas for the board's consideration. They are as follows: (1) board/superintendent relations, (2) board meetings, (3) board/community relations, (4) personal qualities, (5) staff relations, (6) board and instructional programs, (7) board and finance, (8) board inservice, and (9) board leadership. To help other school districts write an evaluation instrument, sample statements from each of the nine areas are provided. (MLF)

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Board self-evaluation: a sure way to improvement

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Are you looking for a sure way for your school board to do its job better *and* to serve as a model to employees at the same time?

Consider self-evaluation of your board. That the merits far outweigh the effort expended is the apparent conviction of many school boards around the country that undergo self-evaluation.

One such school board is the seven-member Board of Trustees of the Tuloso-Midway Independent School District, which serves 2,700 (K-12) students within the city limits of Corpus Christi, Texas.

Purpose of self-evaluation

The Tuloso-Midway trustees are strong supporters of evaluation of all school system personnel. Policies and procedures are in place that describe and regulate the purposes and processes of staff evaluation.

According to policy, the purpose of evaluation is to improve the performance of the person being evaluated so that the best possible instruction is available to students. Teachers are evaluated by administrators, whose effectiveness as evaluators is a factor during their evaluation by the superintendent. The superintendent in turn is evaluated by the school board in an ongoing cycle.

With such an evaluation model in place, a board might assume that all is in order and simply wait for its own evaluation by the voters on election day. However clear the results of such an evaluation, from the perspective of the Tuloso-Midway board and its superintendent, it was insufficient; it would not necessarily lead to improvement of the performance of the board as a whole.

A desire to reflect its school system logo—"T-M: Trademark for Excellence"—led the board to scrutinize its own performance through a self-evaluation instrument. The process allowed board members to come to grips with their responsibilities in a more informed and efficient way.

One board's experience

The decision of the Tuloso-Midway trustees to evaluate their own performance grew out of an annual board retreat planned each year to ensure good working relationships among board members. Past president and current board secretary A. M. (Sonny) Ewing, Jr. advises boards to make the special effort to have a smoothly running, cohesive, and effective board "while relationships are good and before there is a real need or problem."

At such a time, and away from the pressures of their daily responsibilities, the Tuloso-Midway trustees held a board retreat. They were joined by their superintendent and assistant superintendents. During sessions led by a consultant, the trustees decided to develop a self-evaluation instrument.

Evaluate the board as a whole

Underlying the development of the self-evaluation instrument was the understanding that boards will benefit from focusing on the board *as a whole* —not on individual board members. Each member evaluates how the board functions, not how each individual functions.

"This process," says Sonny Ewing, "is consistent with our school system's philosophy because we recognize that we have power as board members only when we function as a board and not as individuals. Our self-evaluation, therefore, is of the board as an entity."

A self-evaluation procedure

Each December, the superintendent distributes self-evaluation instruments to individual board members. When completed, the superintendent compiles them to arrive at consensus and prepares a report for the board. The report, which is available to the public, is reviewed and discussed by the board to determine where and how improvements can be made.

As a result of its first self-evaluation, the Tuloso-Midway board began to work as a more cohesive group. One weakness that surfaced was that some board members were concentrating their attention on specific areas—sometimes to the extent that they were dabbling in administrative areas of responsibility.

One member, for example, was an expert in building construction and tended to be overly involved in school construction projects. When it was pointed out that the board would function more effectively if members directed their energies toward actual board responsibilities, he recognized his behavior as a problem.

Perhaps the most significant result of board self-evaluation was the elimination of board committees. The evaluation revealed that the committee process led to board members being unequally informed. Curriculum committee members, for example, knew a great deal about instructional

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programs but much less about other important areas. While committees serve many boards well, the Tuloso-Midway board now always operates as a committee of the whole.

Self-evaluation benefits

The benefits of self-evaluation provide many reasons to justify a school board using the process. When a board evaluates itself:

- The role of the board is reaffirmed in the eyes of the board and its patrons and employees.
- The evaluation instrument provides a comprehensive "job description" for new board members and aids in their orientation.
- The board serves as the model for staff evaluation.
- The self-evaluation has a positive effect on the way in which board members carry out their responsibilities; it helps to improve performance collectively.
- The self-evaluation helps the board to identify specifically areas of strength and areas of concern; it can suggest solutions to concerns.
- The self-evaluation provides accountability to school system patrons.
- The superintendent is assisted in helping the board reach its projected goals.
- The increased efficiency of the board directly benefits students.
- The process encourages board harmony and good working relationships.

What should you evaluate?

The Tuloso-Midway self-evaluation instrument contains nine areas for the board's consideration. They are:

- Board/Superintendent Relations
- Board Meetings
- Board/Community Relations
- Personal Qualities
- Staff Relations
- Board and Instructional Programs
- Board and Finance
- Board Inservice
- Board Leadership

Each area is evaluated, using a scale, to judge quality (the degree of excellence) and/or quantity (percentage of time) of performance.

How to self-evaluate

In writing an evaluation instrument, a board should describe its major responsibilities in the appropriate categories. To get you started, here are sample statements from the Tuloso-Midway self-evaluation instrument, all written from the perspective of evaluating the board as an entity.

Board/Superintendent Relations

1. Has well-developed written policies for the guidance of the superintendent.
2. Provides the superintendent with constructive criticism when necessary.
3. Commends the superintendent when commendation is earned.
4. Channels major information requests through the superintendent.
5. Reaches decisions only on the basis of study of all available background data and consideration of the recommendation of the superintendent.

Board Meetings

1. Has well-defined written policies upon which board action is based.
2. Obtains adequate information from the superintendent about agenda items prior to each board meeting.
3. Observes the spirit as well as the letter of the open-meetings law.
4. Allows time on its agenda for public participation at its meetings.
5. Listens and shows respect for opinions and concerns of its members.
6. Conducts all board business within two to three hours.

Board/Community Relations

1. Encourages community attendance at meetings.
2. Maintains effective communication channels with the community.
3. Provides access to information concerning all public actions of the board, board policies, and details of the school system's educational and business operations.

Personal Qualities

1. Has a sincere and unselfish interest in public education and in the contribution it makes to the development of children.
2. Shows respect for and genuine interest in people.
3. Operates on the basis that it has legal authority only when operating through properly announced and conducted board meetings.
4. Is willing to devote the time necessary to become an effective board.

Staff Relations

1. Develops sound personnel policies, involving the staff when appropriate.
2. Channels major information requests through the superintendent.
3. Makes the staff aware of the esteem in which it is held.
4. Encourages staff growth and increased competency.

Board and Instructional Program

1. Devotes time at board meetings to the presentation and discussion of the curriculum.
2. Encourages the participation of the professional staff and, in certain instances, the public in the development of the curriculum.
3. Weighs all decisions in terms of what is best for all of the students.

Board and Finance

1. Establishes written policies that will ensure efficient business management.
2. Makes provisions for long-range financial planning.
3. Makes provisions for assisting community understanding of budgetary matters.

Board Inservice

1. Makes provision for an inservice program for board members through workshops, seminars, and/or retreats.
2. Attends regional, state, and/or national school board meetings to

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stay informed regarding current issues and regulations.
3. Reads publications from state and national school board organizations.

Board Leadership

1. Seeks to influence local, state, and national school board organizations for the improvement of public education.
2. Assumes a leadership position for other local school boards in influencing state legislators and other elected officials.

Self-evaluation takes commitment

To be a practical and effective tool, board self-evaluation requires commitment to the idea of improvement—commitment from the entire board. Each board member needs to see value in the process.

As the composition of the board changes from the original members who chose to undergo self-evaluation, however, the commitment to the process may decrease. The board president then may take on the responsibility of orienting new members to the value and significance of the process.

Before you start

It's a good idea to take some time to sit down together—away from the board room—before plunging into the creation of procedures for self-evaluation. Remember that it is important to start the process of self-evaluation when relationships are good.

To begin, you'll want to identify the advantages and disadvantages of such a process for your school board. Identify your major areas of responsibility and list your major goals. Decide together the behaviors that are important to you as you try to work together as a board for the benefit of the students in your school system. Make certain that in the process you are evaluating *total* board performance.

Assistance is available

You might consider using a consultant to help you view objectively where you are and where you want to go. Someone who works nationally rather than on a state or regional level can be helpful in presenting fresh ideas from many different sources. Be sure, however, that the self-evaluation instrument is written to reflect your own school system's needs and values.

The self-evaluation instrument used by the Tuloso-Midway school board was developed originally by the White Plains (N.Y.) board and superintendent with assistance from a consultant. Neighboring school systems or your state school boards association may have other self-evaluation instruments that can be adopted to your board's needs.

Maintain an objective outlook

Self-evaluation takes courage. It takes the ability to stand back, evaluate your own actions, and make a reasonable and accurate appraisal of them. It implies a willingness on the part of the board to be open.

An honest self-evaluation can be a powerful tool to increase your efficiency and effectiveness as a board. Tuloso-Midway board president D.W. Haven believes that evaluation "assures objectivity and reduces as much as can be the possibility of making errors as we operate the schools." Most important, self-evaluation keeps the board aware of its proper role as defined by policy and keeps the focus where it needs to be: on students. ■

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grams for the victim's peers on school.

"Principals seem to be afraid of this approach," said Smith, "but such survivor programs are an excellent resource for schools."

Provide board leadership

There are several ways in which school boards can address the teenage suicide epidemic. The first is to take a proactive stance rather than waiting for a student in your community to commit suicide. Some suggestions are:

- demonstrate your concern and leadership by adopting a resolution recognizing the problem and stating your commitment to the welfare of students;
- review related policies (e.g., guidance program, relations with community organizations and governmental authorities, staff development, health curriculum) to make sure they support appropriate efforts such as cooperative programs between schools and mental health centers;
- learn how other school systems are addressing the problem (e.g. school systems in Plano (Tx.), Fairfax County (Va.), Quakertown (Pa.), and Cherry Creek (Colo.).
- lobby state leaders to address the problem through such initiatives as a study commission (New York State has such a commission) and funding demonstration projects (the case in California). ■

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college or to receive employer training, the future needs of handicapped students must be met. Not too many employers are capable of training the educationally handicapped. Others are not interested.

What should school boards do?

By the time a classified student reaches age 12 or 13, staff should be able to determine if the youngster will be able to fit into the real world of training programs. If not, boards should work toward a cooperative effort to provide vocational programs for skilled and semi-skilled jobs with other boards in the region, county, or state; large school systems may be able to manage on their own.

In Bergen County, the employment services agency was consulted regarding job opportunities. Based on that information, the county established training programs in such skills as furniture upholstery, hospital and food services, and clerical duties.

A survey of program alumni revealed that over 60 percent continued working in their first job placement and 90 percent were working in the field in which they were trained. Some have gone on to college. These young people have gained the dignity that comes from accomplishing something—and doing it well.

Related services

One of the most expensive aspects of special education today is the cost of related services. Just what must schools provide?

A useful guideline is to provide only those services that will enable the handicapped student to learn. Deciding what those services are is not simple, however.

A continuous stream of court cases involves the level of service required by individual students. Before creating new services that may set a precedent for the level of related services in future cases, be sure to consult your legal counsel. ■